Trying to get the attention of consumers these days can feel like whispering at a heavy metal concert. You don’t think anyone can hear you. Getting noticed in a crowded, competitive marketplace is a challenge for restaurant businesses of all sizes and types.

The Restaurant Marketing Symposium, part of the 2017 Midwest Foodservice Expo held in March, focused solely on helping restaurants hone their marketing acumen and take their efforts to the next level. Thirteen seminars and 18 interactive Quick Bites sessions helped restaurant professionals gain insight on driving more customers to their business by making their marketing voice louder and on target for their brand.

We’ve summarized in this article some key takeaways and success stories from industry experts and restaurant colleagues that were shared at the conference.

**Freshening a brand**

More than 90 percent of Americans eat at least one slice of pizza per month, and much of it is ordered from the nation’s 70,000 pizzerias. The business of distinguishing one pie maker from another is a monumental marketing challenge, no matter how you slice it.

“Pizza is a concept with 50 years of legs under it” at Milwaukee-based Pizza Man, observes CEO Sarah Baker. A recent rebranding of the business, established in 1970, meant introducing a new logo whose “pizza dude,” Nintendo-esque graphic identity replaces a hippy-ish caricature, “something my grandparents would like.”

How do you make standard fare such as pizza appear new, fresh and exciting? “It comes back to the story,” Baker says. “What customers want is an experience,” but restaurateurs tend to limit their marketing focus to food and cocktail quality.

In Wisconsin Dells, a dinosaur mascot named Rex dances with staff and visits with children at Dells Pizza Lab, which opened in April 2016. “We’re interactive with our guests,” says co-owner Trisha Akbeg. Social media posts make customers aware of major events in the area, as well as pizza specials. Online video clips provide on-location and behind-the-scenes peeks at life in the dough lane.

“It’s all advertising that we don’t have to pay for when people keep sharing,” Akbeg explains.

Do an online search for “pizza near me” or “pizza deals,” and don’t be surprised if a Toppers Pizza outlet shows up. Showing up on top in Google and Bing searches is a priority and six-figure investment for this regional chain, which also buys ads to show up when a pizza lover searches for the company’s biggest competitors.

“We are about to experience a massive shift in ad methods and marketing messages,” predicts Scott
Iverson, vice president of marketing for Toppers.

**The power of video**

Knowing how to position yourself online is crucial, regardless of whether your specialty is fine dining or boxed pizza deliveries. No form of media is as powerful as video, says Don Stanley, founder of 3Rhino Media, Madison. He also teaches digital marketing at the University of Wisconsin.

“Video takes you there and makes strangers feel like they know you,” he says. “If a picture is worth a thousand words, then a video is worth a million.” Just like Norm on the vintage sitcom Cheers, people relish a sense of belonging, and “today the customer’s connection with you begins long before they walk in the door.”

Businesses with a minimal budget for marketing can start with a smartphone or computer camera to show chef demos, employee enthusiasm or quick interviews with loyal customers. Don’t worry about appealing to everybody, Stanley says; it is most important to be yourself. Authenticity matters.

“People look for businesses and organizations that they can trust,” and “people will start to feel like insiders when you show them, for example, where the chickens are raised” that provide a restaurant’s eggs for breakfast.

Stanley suggests avoiding clips that are no more than shameless self-promotion. He also recommends answering often-asked questions and addressing customer concerns. Other possibilities include sharing cooking tips, including testimonials from guests, or using video to introduce customers or staff as fans.

He edits video quickly with iMovie (for Apple equipment) or Adobe Premiere Elements (which works with Windows too). He suggests sharing videos on your website, YouTube or Facebook—concentrating on one outlet at a time.

Vicki Flannery, co-owner of Apple

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Holler, a farm-based restaurant in Sturtevant, uses an iPhone to produce 10- to 20-second video clips of the farm’s apple orchards, hayrides, chef at work and customers enjoying themselves. These Facebook postings began at least five years ago. They are also considering the use of drones for aerial views.

**Run with the brand**

Good marketing begins with brand development and grows from there. Culver’s devotion to small-town values and farmers who supply the fast-casual chain’s key ingredients is “integrated into all we do,” says Emily Patterson, marketing director. That includes farm-themed coloring sheets for children and five barns with a “thank you farmers” message, painted atop a Culver’s blue base and easily seen when driving busy highways.

“People have an appreciation for farming, even if it doesn’t come right from their back yard,” Patterson believes. Colleague Jessie Corning, senior marketing manager, says a “Seeds of Gratitude” digital campaign generated 110,000 notes of thanks to farmers on social media.

Culver’s also has filmed a day in the life of a dairy farmer, sponsored FFA events and for a second year will feature major advocates of agriculture who also are social media influencers (using the #farmingfriday hashtag on Twitter).

Customers who donate $1 for the FFA get a scoop of custard on a designated Scoops of Thanks day. Through the FFA Blue Jacket Program, franchise operators recently raised nearly $20,000, used to present personalized FFA jackets to over 150 students.

Culver’s 10-person marketing team works with an advertising agency on these projects, which are logical and relevant spinoffs from company slogans, such as “our food isn’t made, it’s grown.”

**Success on a budget**

At the opposite extreme is Tyler Sailsbury, who has no measurable marketing budget or staff for his two Whitewater restaurants, The Black Sheep and Casual Joe’s. He relies on Instagram and Facebook posts to spread the word about both businesses, catching the attention of FSR Magazine, who recently chose him as one of 40 restaurant stars on the rise nationwide.

“It’s not as much about what we’re trying to sell, but what we’re trying to teach” about using locally produced ingredients, Sailsbury says.

So the emphasis is about introducing and appreciating farmers whose products are featured in his restaurants. “Thank you make all the difference” to both customers and staff, he believes, and online staff bios help customers feel connected beyond the chef-owner. “People want to see me in the restaurant, but with two restaurants, that’s not possible,” says Sailsbury, to explain one rationale behind the bios.

Kristin Booth of Main Street Hub, a Texas-based marketing platform, considers social media posts as “an extension of your
customer service,” especially since nine of ten people say online reviews influence their buying decisions. “There’s a lot you can do that can put you in a positive light and cost you nothing but time.”

Engage in online customer conversation and respond to feedback, she advises, but it’s imperative to contest reviews that contain profanities or hate language, to get them removed by the host website (Yelp, TripAdvisor, Google+, etc.). If you want a blog but don’t know how to proceed, read other restaurant blogs and see what resonates, says Dan Gartlan of Stevens and Tate Marketing, Lombard, IL.

**Millennials and Gen Z**

What else? Be aware that many menu choices and options are what younger generations expect. Prego began with one type of spaghetti sauce, notes Kyle Cherek of the television series *Wisconsin Foodie,* and now they produce around two dozen varieties. At Toppers Pizza, Iverson notes, it is a priority to make pie personalization easy and affordable.

The menu’s popular Buffalo Chicken Mac and Cheese Pizza is one result of noticing unusual combos that customers concocted. And since online orders are encouraged, each customer leaves a “digital footprint” that includes an email and phone number.

Toppers targets ages 18 to 34 with irreverent, fun marketing; “we try to speak like an 18- or 20-year-old,” Iverson says. “The only place these things live is in our digital channels,” which means no investment in print media advertising.

**Millennials vs. Gen Z**

Millennials were born in the early 1980s to mid/late 1990s, and Gen Z is younger. Here is how the two generations differ, besides age, says marketer Scott Iverson of Toppers Pizza.

**Millennials**
- Texts to communicate.
- Curators and sharers.
- “Now” focused.
- Optimists.
- Yearns to be discovered.

**Gen Z**
- Uses imagery to communicate.
- Creators and collaborators.
- “Future” focused.
- Realists.
- Yearns to work for success.

By 2020, Gen Z will make up 40 percent all U.S. consumers. “They have a shorter attention span, so messages to them need to be short and quick,” Iverson says.

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Experts and restaurateurs suggest investing in social media influencers. “This type of person might have 20,000 followers and only need a free meal” to spread the word about your restaurant, says Ian Abston of NEWaukee, a Milwaukee networking group focused on changing the way people connect.

Pizza Man’s Baker suggests studying your restaurant’s online followers and tag high-level influencers (those with a lot of followers of their own).

“A social media post can go from 2,000 views to 20,000 if the right person shares it,” she says; be as public and as unique as possible when responding to social media feedback, and offer online customers an incentive to return.

**Invest in good works**

Since Gen Z (today’s high school and college students) rallies around good causes, a percentage of each Toppers sale goes to a food pantry within the zip code of the order. “The story of where money is going matters” to Millennials as well, Abston says.

Philanthropic efforts help employees feel proud about where they work, adds Katie Espinosa, multi-unit director for Bartolotta Restaurants, Milwaukee. “They are always tuned in, but life is not always all that much fun for Millennials,” she says. “They like the unique, to create their own thing, to have choices.”

Garlant encourages restaurateurs to “stand for something bigger than your own brand, and make your brand the hero of the story.” Another way to stand out is to tread where no one else has gone.

Abston uses the standard brunch as an example. Consider creating and featuring a “socially engaging brunch drink” in addition to the standard Bloody Mary and mimosa. Or hire a blues band to play during brunch. “A vibrant restaurant scene is the key to a vibrant city,” he believes.

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**Marketing Emphasis at Midwest Foodservice Expo**

Marketing and social media strategy were the themes of myriad seminars, panel discussions and chat sessions for restaurateurs at the 2017 Midwest Foodservice Expo, held March 13-15 in Milwaukee.

“It’s hard to find the time to experiment (with marketing ideas) and good to hear what works for others,” says Rachel Anderson, who handles communications for Suncrest Gardens Farm, near Cochrane.

“We need to understand how to get on top of social media, to use it effectively,” says Peter Idsvoog, chef at Living Stone Bistro and Coffeehouse, opening this year in downtown Wautoma.

Look for more discussion and analysis of trends and strategies during the next Midwest Foodservice Expo, March 12-14, 2018.

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**Why Add Video?**

- Sixty percent of all content consumed online is video. By 2019, the percentage is expected to be 89 percent.
- About 1 billion hours of video are watched on YouTube in one day.
- About 90 percent of consumers say product videos are helpful in their decision-making process.
- When a video is used in email, there is a 200 to 300 percent increase in click-through rates.
- You are 50 times more likely to be found on Google if you do a video and add a great description of it.

—Statistics come from Don Stanley, who teaches digital marketing at the University of Wisconsin.